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ABSTRACT

Rural education may be the beneficiary of the current national focus on educational reform since concerns have centered on improving education for all students regardless of where they live, a direction not emphasized in most previous reform movements. The reforms bring challenges relating to teacher certification, curriculum, facilities, student services, and organization to rural educators and policymakers, but they also bring extraordinary opportunities for real progress. The movement toward reduced class size, increased services, higher standards, accountability, competency-based curriculum and expanded learning opportunities for students will probably continue to impact rural schools for the next 5 to 10 years. Trends reflecting concerns related to learning of thinking skills, efficient use of instructional technology, increases in early childhood education programs, and projected teacher shortages will provide additional challenges and opportunities for rural schools. These trends suggest states should inititate: incentive programs; curriculum development; teacher allocation formulas; rural school networks; allocation of materials, supplies, and equipment; facility renovation; recruitment and retention programs; staff development incentives; and instructional technology implementation. Recommended on the local level are community involvement, partnerships, regional foundations, networks, and use of instructional technology. Appropriate federal roles include collecting, processing, and disseminating demographic statistics; identifying networks; and supporting research. (NEC)

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AND

IMPACTS ON RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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ABSTRACT

STATE POLICY TRENDS AND IMPACTS ON RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Educational reform is an ongoing process, but periodically public interest focuses on educational concerns and the level of reform activity is dramatically increased. The United States is currently experiencing one of these periods.

Rural education may be a big winner. Concerns have focused on improving education for all students regardless of where they live, a direction not emphasized in most previous movements.

The reforms bring challenges to rural educators and policy-makers, but they also bring extraordinary opportunities for real progress. These challenges relate to teacher certification, curriculum, facilities, student services and organization.

The movement toward reduced class size, increased services, higher standards, accountability, competency-based curriculum and expanded learning opportunities for students will probably continue to impact rural schools for the next five to ten years.

Trends reflecting concerns related to the learning of thinking skills, the efficient use of instructional technology, increases in early childhood education programs and the projected teacher shortage will provide additional challenges and opportunities for rural schools.

This paper reviews reform activities and suggests actions for state, local and federal policy-makers and educational researchers.

State educational reform is an ongoing process. A few states each year inititate new programs and procedures designed to improve education. Periodically, the public interest in improving educational opportunities is raised and when this occurs there is increased activity at the state and local levels and sometimes at the federal level. Educational issues move to the forefront of the legislative agenda. New programs and regulations that respond to perceived needs are enacted.

The United States is currently experiencing one of these periods of educational concern and action. Numerous national reports have called for educational reforms. Most states have initiated commissions or task forces to study educational issues and to recommend improvements. Many states have passed legislation designed to provide additional resources for education while increasing accountablility.

Rural education may be a big winner in this latest round of reforms. Concerns have focused on improving education for all students regardless of where they live, a direction not emphasized in most previous movements.

The reforms bring challenges to rural educators and policy-makers. The reforms require creativity and a willingness to do things in a different manner. The reforms bring extraordinary opportunities for real progress.

This paper reviews the issues associated with current reforms. It reviews potential trends and provides a series of recommendations associated with responses to current issues and projected trends.

Major Issues

The time of the year when questions pertaining to the impact of state reforms are raised probably affects the priority given to specific responses. For example, during the early summer months when many administrators are busily determining teacher assignments and student schedules for the coming school year, concerns about teacher certification, size of high school classes for low demand courses, and the availability of classroom space are prevalent. Later in the year concerns about student services assume their pragmatic priority. Issues related to district consolidation and annexation are usually raised during more philosophical discussions. This time-of-year phenomenon is reflected in the order that the following issues are discussed.

Teacher Certification

Increased requirements for teacher certification affect rural schools in at least three ways. First, students who receive instruction from better prepared teachers will benefit. A study conducted by Hawk and Coble at East Carolina University demonstrated that students taught mathematics by certified teachers performed significantly higher than students taught by non-certified teachers. Although the sample was small and it is desirable that the study to be replicated prior to reaching unquestionable conclusions, the study suggests that when teachers are prepared to teach the courses assigned, students do perform better. Increased certification requirements are a positive step, but they do present two problems for the school administrator.

Small high schools do not have the luxury of having a foreign language teacher who teaches only foreign languages. Science teachers are often required to teach mathematics or other courses. English teachers are expected to have dual or triple certification in schools that may have two or eight classes of high school English. Small rural high schools require teachers who have certification in more than one learning area, yet the trend is toward more in-depth single certification.

Increased certification requirements often result in the de-certification of teachers who have previously taught some courses. It may also decrease the number of new teachers with multiple certification. These two effects combine to make the assignment of teachers more difficult in small rural secondary schools.

Increased certification requirements also have an effect on the attraction and retention of teachers. Individuals who are motivated to obtain multiple certification are often those who are attracted to positions that provide greater possibilities for upward mobility. They are the individuals who are motivated to achieve, not only as teachers, but also as instructional and administrative leaders. They are interested in both economic and status awards associated with doing a good job. Small, rural and economically disadvantaged school systems cannot successfully compete with large and economically advantaged school systems in attracting these teachers.

Increased certification requirements limit the pool of multiple-certified teachers. This fact has a negative effect on the ability of many rural schools to attract and retain the very type of teacher that is required to effectively staff a small school.

Curriculum

Reform movements have resulted in an increase in the number of courses required for high school graduation and an increase in university admission requirements. The requirement that geographical location of a student's residence should not determine available learning opportunities appears to be a popular, if belated, philosophy. Students should be provided with opportunitiesto take physics, advanced chemistry, calculus, creative writing or a third year of a foreign language. Students needing remedial services ought to be served. The reform movements seek to provide students who attend small rural and often isolated high schools the learning opportunities available in more affluent urban areas.

This is a positive effect, but it does create new constraints for the school administrator. Requirements for increased learning opportunities when coupled with lower class size restrictions in all academic courses, a limited number of allocated teachers and increased certification requirements can create an quandary for the administrator. Teacher certification, courses with low enrollments, instructional space requirements, restrictions on the number of periods a teacher may teach each day, and transportation system constraints can interact with the total enrollment factor to present the school administrator with an almost impossible task.

Reform movements have also changed elementary schools. The combined effects of a competency-based curriculum and reduced class size introduce an additional complexity in some rural elementary schools. Reduced class sizes often lead to combination classes and when coupled with a competency-based curriculum dramatically increases the amount and range of material a teacher is expected to cover.

For teachers who have historically taught in "one-room" environments this is not a new constraint, but for teachers and principals who have always experienced "one-grade" assignments a new and different instructional situation is introduced. It is not of the same order of magnitude as some of the other issues reviewed, but it is a problem and should not be ignored.

Facilities

Increased learning opportunities, smaller class sizes and additional student services require additional instructional and service space. More space means new or renovated facilities unless the school has usable unused classrooms and service areas. New or renovated facilities translate into additional capital expenditures.

For some economically disadvantaged systems where the state provides personnel and materials and the local governmental units are required to cover expenditures associated with facilities and their operation there is yet another problem. With fewer households having school age children and a national movement toward the lowering of taxes, it is often difficult to convince the majority of voters that a bond issuance is required to adequately meet the need for new or renovated schools.

Most school reform movements have dealt with instruction and services. Few have addressed the facilities question.

Services

Many of the increased services focus on counseling and health care. Elementary school staffs are often expanded to include a counselor and school nurse. The challenges presented to rural schools by these increased services are associated with the previously discussed issues of space and recruiting. There may be a supply/demand problem in the area of elementary school counselors. If this is the case, then small, rural and isolated schools will be at a disadvantage in the recruitment and retention of counselors.

Organization

Some school reforms call for the consolidation or annexation of school systems. This is usually accomplished through one of three techniques. First, systems failing to achieve student performance standards are placed on probation while attempts are made to provide students with learning opportunities that are designed to increase overall student performance. If student performance is not increased to an acceptable level within a specified period then the system can be placed under the direct operation of the state for a period of time or merged with another system.

A second movement toward consolidation or annexation is also related to standards. Systems are required to meet standards related to facilities and materials. Systems failing to meet standards are annexed by other systems.

The third movement toward consolidation and merger is to fund only one position per county. For example, a state may fund only one finance officer per county. In counties with two or more school systems this becomes an incentive for "voluntary" merger.

It is difficult to generalize about school consolidation. Consolidation of districts in North Carolina is a different issue than that in Arkansas or Nebraska. But when consolidations do occur, school policy makers, administrators and teachers are presented with the challenge to accomplish a smooth transition with the least disruption to the learning process. That is not an easy task.

Trends

The movement toward reduced class size, increased services, higher certification standards, accountability, competency-based curriculum and expanded learning opportunities for students will probably continue to affect rural schools for the next five to ten years. The growing understanding about the relationship between education and the economy and the predictable realization of the relationships between an aging society, financial security, worker productivity and an effective educational system combine to suggest that the interest in education may not be a passing fad but a new norm.

Rural education will need to respond to the challenges the current reforms present and prepare to respond to additional challenges. There are three additional movements that may effect rural education as they are reflected through school improvement efforts.

Thinking Skills

The focus on student performance is gradually becoming multi-faceted. Basic skills was once the sole concern. Then as people began to understand that college entrance exams, i.e., the SAT and ACT, are not measures of basic skills and as they comprehend performance data provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progess, attention has begun to focus on higher order skills as well as the basic skills. This transformation is not yet complete, but today many people understand the distinction between basic and higher order skills. There is growing recognition of the deficits that appear in student performance measures that focus on the higher order skills.

This growing concern is already being expressed in a call for more instruction and accountability in the areas of mathematical and social problem solving, critical and analytical reading, persuasive and technical writing and scientific processes. The teaching of thinking skills and creativity will probably be explicitly specified by legislative and board of education mandates.

Rural schools will be required to respond to these challenges. The response will require that staff be trained in the teaching of higher order skills and that students be provided with the opportunities to develop these skills.

Issues pertaining to increased certification requirements, staff recruitment and retention, and provision of low demand academic courses will probably intensify. Rural schools will be expected to respond to the continuing needs associated with the teaching of basic skills and to provide students with the opportunity to learn the higher order skills.

Instructional Technology

The use of instructional technology in rural schools is a topic of one of the companion papers; therefore, the reference in this paper will be limited to a single point.

Reform strategies in many states include the use of microcomputers as an instructional tool. Hardware and software are being made available. Some states have mandated computer literacy as part of their graduation requirements. The challenge of the effective use of microcomputers in the instructional process is already present.

Microcomputers may be the forerunner of a multitude of technology that will greatly affect the instructional process. Microcomputers combined with interactive-video technology has the potential ofdramatically changing the role of teacher from the deliverer of instruction to manager of instructional processes.

Telecommunication technology opens the door wide to options for effectively providing low demand courses to students in the most isolated areas. Large computers that link mini- and microcomputers in statewide accountability systems have the potential of vastly changing current testing and assessment procedures.

Hardware and software are not human resources. They may be compared with the hardware and software associated with military defense systems. This will very likely provide education with a new ally in seeking increased funding for guaranteeing that the nation remains strong through an effective educational system, as the relationships between an aging society, financial security, worker productivity, the national economy and schooling begin to be understood more fully. This serendipitous coalition of educators and supplies of hardware and software may propel education into a new technological area.

Rural education will be expected to keep pace with these technological changes. Staff, curriculum, services and facilities will all be impacted. The set of challenges presented by technology may make all of today's issues appear simple in comparison.

Early Childhood Education

There is a growing call for the expansion of educational programs for three and four year olds. Research has indicated that the performance gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children usually begins to increase in the third grade. This may be linked to the size of the student's vocabulary when they enter school. Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds enter school with a vocabulary of approximately 2000 words. Children from economically advantaged homes enter with a vocabulary of approximately 4000 words. The rates of learning for these two groups appear to be equivalent during the first and second grades, but during the third grade, when the level of content and hence the vocabulary requirement is greatly expanded, students with vocabulary deficits begin to demonstrate less performance. As this relationship between entering vocabulary and performance becomes better understood, the call of increases in early childhood education will become more intense.

There is one additional trend that may have a negative effect on rural education if steps are not taken now to respond to events as they occur.

Projected Teacher Shortage

Increased salaries, loan forgiveness programs and career growth programs may reverse the current trend of declining enrollments in teacher preparation programs. Increased requirements for admission into teacher preparation programs and reduced class sizes may increase demand while decreasing supply and these effects may offset the gains made through improved working conditions. All of these unknown factors make it difficult to accurately predict if there will be enough trained teachers to meet the demand as current teachers retire or exit the profession.

There are predictions of teacher shortages and if these predictions materialize then rural schools may be the first to be affected. Rural educators should follow closely data on teacher supply and demand and if shortages appear to be forthcoming, steps will need to be taken to ensure that rural schools can continue to meet their educational responsibilities.

Recommendations

The issues and trends suggest that state, local and federal governments should plan and implement responses to these identified needs. The research community needs to respond by providing policy makers and educators with the best information possible as decisions

are made to provide students who attend schools serving rural areas with equal access to quality learning opportunities. The following recommendations are provided for consideration by those responsible for rural education.

State

If all of the answers were available prior to an action being taken to improve education, then very little would be accomplished. States should continue to take action using the best current data, but they should also build into the process reviews of the outcomes of their actions and to take corrective steps when new information becomes available.

The following suggestions are general and may not match the needs of a particular state. The intent is to offer a "salad bar" that can be used in building a "dish" that is appropriate to individual needs and appetites.

Incentive Programs

States should develop and fund programs that recognize and award local initiatives that respond to the challenges presented to rural schools by the reform movement. For example, local systems

that solve problems associated with providing low demand courses by sharing instructional staff with other systems should be given additional support to offset the travel cost incurred by these cooperative programs.

Curriculum Development

States should initiate curriculum development efforts designed to integrate the teaching of higher order skills into all levels of instruction. Curriculum specialists should not consider the teaching of thinking skills as an add-on to be accomplished after basic skills instruction. The application of basic skills should be an integral component of every curriculum.

Teacher Allocations

Formulas used in allocating teachers to rural schools should consider course demands. For example, if the state requires that learning opportunities in physics be provided for students, then the teacher allocation formula should consider those cases where only a small number of students take physics. Allocations should not be based solely on total school enrollment.

Rural School Networks

Services that network rural schools should be provided by the state. The state should encourage and arrange for the sharing of concerns between and among small schools, institutions of higher education and the state agency. Services should include technicalassistance in solving problems unique to rural schools. Annual rural education conferences should be held with the agenda designed to allow systems to share concerns and "show and tell" successful practices.

Materials, Supplies and Equipment Allocations

Allocations to rural schools should consider the numbers of students enrolled in learning opportunities that require special materials, supplies and equipment. For example, the equipment cost for some vocational education courses is not determined by the number of students taking the course but by the type of equipment required. Funding formulas for equipment based on the number of students and not on equipment needs is not equitable to small schools.

Facilities

States should explore options that would assist economically disadvantaged counties in the construction and renovation of educational facilities. Options that shift the source of revenue from property taxes should be considered. Formulas for distributing funds should reflect both need and the ability to raise revenues.

Recruitment and Retention

States should provide loan forgiveness programs for individuals who agree to teach in rural schools and who are willing to obtain multiple certification. Teachers currently serving rural schools and who are willing to continue to teach in rural schools should be provided opportunities to acquire additional certification at state expense.

States should provide programs that assist rural schools in the recruitment and placement of teachers and administrators.

Staff Development

Formulas used to allocate staff development funds should consider the number of teachers serving isolated geographical regions. The state should provide incentives to institutions of

higher education who are willing to provide staff development activities in isolated areas. Funding for state regional service districts should consider the number of schools served, the number of teachers in the region, and the geographical isolation of schools served.

Instructional Technology

States should provide for programs that assist local districts in the planning and operation of instructional programs that make optimal use of instructional technology. Rural districts should be encouraged through financial incentive programs to use telecommunication technology in providing learning opportunities for students.

Local

Most local units consider issues generated through national and state school reform movements as challenges that will provide the students they serve with more learning opportunities and increased services. Responses to these challenges will require additional effort, with a willingness to explore new methods and with an acceptance of changes in the ways that learning opportunities and services have been provided. Rural educators have the commitment and determination required to accomplish this set of tasks.

The following suggestions are intended to assist local rural educators in accomplishing their goals. Some suggestions are not relevant to some rural situations; the intent is to offer suggestions that can be matched with local needs and then considered for implementation.

Community Involvement

The expanding and changing role of a rural school requires that the community served by the school understand the instructional and service objectives of the school. Community support is essential for a successful program and community understanding is a prerequisite for support. The community should be included in the development of educational goals and strategic plans. Plans should identify the strengths and needs of the community and describe responses to needs that use the community's strengths. The educational plan should include services for the entire community; for example, school facilities should be available for community education programs and activities.

Partnerships

Rural schools should reach out to develop partnerships with civic organizations, churches and local businesses. Partnership efforts can be used to provide additional services that would not be

possible within the budgets provided by state and local governments. No partnership effort can be too small, because the understanding and support developed through such efforts are critical to establishing strong links between the school and the community. Suggested areas for partnership efforts include the following: tutorial programs; transportation for individuals requiring special services; dropout prevention programs that use one-on-one and role model approaches; public awareness campaigns to help parents understand why they should encourage their sons and daughters to take advantage of learning opportunities that may require additional effort; community based learning experiences; and public recognition programs designed to reward students and teachers for jobs well done.

Regional Foundations

Many urban areas and some rural counties with strong economic bases have established education foundations to provide support for additional educational programs. Rural systems in communities with adequate economic bases should consider establishing local education foundations. Rural systems that are not economically advantaged should consider forming consortiums with other rural systems for the purpose of establishing regional education foundations. Regional

foundations can solicit local support for programs, but the focus should be on attracting state and national support for educational activities.

Networks

Rural systems should participate in networks established to provide information on needs and educational program responses that are unique to rural communities. If networks are not available in an area, then a group of rural systems should actively develop a network.

Instructional Technology

Local systems should explore the possibilities that technology provides in responding to the challenges and issues associated with educational reform movements. For example, the use of interactiveaudio and video systems may provide a solution to providing learning opportunities for students interested in calculus, physics, creative writing, or other low demand courses. Also, an interactive video link between isolated schools and an institution of higher education could provide an answer to the need for inservice training required to achieve multiple certification for some teachers.

Recruitment and Retention

Local systems working within the community can provide adequate and reasonable housing opportunities for prospective teachers. The systems and community can also work together in providing orientation experiences for teachers new to the region and can continue to provide support service as newcomers become acclimated to the area.

Federal

The role of the federal government should differ from the roles of state and local governments. The states have the constitutional responsibility for education. Local units have the responsibility to provide direct educational services for individuals. The federal government's responsibilities are to guarantee that no person is denied educational opportunities, to support state and local systems in providing service to populations with special needs, to provide information services, and to support research and development activities designed to further the state-of-the-art.

The following activities are suggested as appropriate roles for the federal government to play in supporting the improvement of rural education.

Demographics

The federal government should collect, process and disseminate adequate statistics needed to accurately describe demographics and educational programs associated with rural areas.

Networks

The federal government should identify networks that can be used by rural education systems in maintaining contact with other systems that share common problems and concerns. A rural network handbook should be developed and periodically updated. The handbook should describe the benefits of actively participating in networks, the procedures that a system should follow to optimize the benefits of networking, and should provide an annotated list of networks.

Research Support

The federal government should provide support for research activities subsequently listed. Research that contributes to the modification and expansion of the rural education knowledge data base should be supported through competitive grants to local rural education systems, state departments of public instruction, institutions of higher education, and individuals interested in the improvement of rural education.

Learning Materials Development Support

There is a need for learning materials that capitalize on the strengths of a rural environment, for example, a science text or supplemental materials that suggests how the rural environment can be used as a learning laboratory. The federal government should provide support for the development, field testing, and market testing of such materials. Once prototypes have been developed and their marketability established, the responsibility for the development of additional materials tailored for the rural education market should be transferred to the publishing industry.

Technology Development Support

The federal role in supporting the development of educational technology should consist of three phases. First, the government should provide leadership in developing a public awareness about the relationships between our economy, our defensive systems, and our educational systems. Next, the government needs to support research on the uses of technology in achieving our educational goals. This research should include the development and testing of hardware and software explicitly designed to achieve instructional objectives. Third, the government should support the diffusion and implementation of these developed technologies.

Research Community

Research is required for the advancement of knowledge that will assist rural educators in providing better learning opportunities for students who attend schools serving small, rural and often isolated communities. The federal government, states and local systems must work together in conducting research, but the research community must play a leadership role in the identification, design and implementation of research projects.

The following research topics, associated with the improvement of rural education, are suggested.

Instructional Technology

Research needs to be conducted on the effectiveness and efficiency of instructional technology. Efforts need to be made to determine the appropriate uses of technology. Investigations into the relationships between teachers, students, hardware and software are required. Both basic and applied research needs to be conducted.

Basic research efforts should focus on the development of learning theory related to the use of technology. This research should be used to suggest advances that need to occur in both hardware and software development.

Applied research efforts should focus on currently available hardware and software and its use in the instructional process. Effects on academic performance, interpersonal skills and values need to be determined.

The research menu related to the use of instructional technology may be related in complexity and size to the research effort undertaken to place a man on the moon. Its successful accomplishment may prove to be very important to the security of the national economy and society's survival.

Combination Grades

Although pale in importance to the research agenda associated with instructional technology, there is a need to conduct reseach on the effectiveness of combination grades instruction. Procedures used in establishing combination grade classes and the effectiveness of these approaches in providing students with quality learning experiences need to be studied.

Certification

The relationship between teacher certification and student performance needs to be carefully studied. What elements considered in granting certification are important? Does the certification process need to be complex or are there only a few important factors that should be considered? Should certification requirements be different for teachers who serve in rural school from the requirements for teachers who serve in urban areas? Should certification requirements be different for individuals who enter teaching after completing successful careers in other areas which require knowledge in the learning area for which the person is seeking certification?

Certification is an important factor in determining teacher supply. Given the challenges presented to rural schools by increased certification requirements and given the projected shortages in certified teachers in the near future, research in this area should be given top priority.

Environmental Factors Instructional Use

The rural environment could provide a learning laboratory for students attending small and isolated schools. Research needs to be conducted to determine if the rural environment can be used

effectively and efficiently. Are there advantages and disadvantages? How can the strengths of a rural setting be best used in improving the quality of education?

Instructional Styles/Learning Styles

Research is needed to determine the optimum match between instructional styles and learning styles. Do students attending schools in rural areas tend to differ in learning styles from non-rural students? Are there specific instructional techniques that are more appropriate for rural areas than urban areas?

These recommendations for researchers and government officials are not intended to be inclusive. They are intended as a starting point for continuing the discussion of rural school improvement.

Conclusion

The educational improvement movement presents rural schools with new challenges in providing quality instruction and services for students, but with the challenges come opportunities, and the benefits of those opportunities far outweigh the issues and problems that must be faced in implementing reforms.

The improvement movement has the support of the nation's business leaders. They understand the relationships between a strong economy and education. They understand that economic prosperity depends upon the productivity of workers. They understand the links between productivity and education. And as they gain an understanding of the potential that instructional technological advances can have on the economy, as they begin to draw economic parallels between the development and deployment of military hardware and software with the development and deployment of educational hardware and software, then the improvement movement will gain a new life and the country may enter a period of unmatched educational advancement.

Rural educators, because of the challenges that they are being forced to face today, could be the technological educational leaders of tomorrow. As rural educators build on the strengths of their communities, learn to use technology effectively and efficiently without replacing essential human elements, and provide quality learning opportunities for students, they will gain the experience required to lead the nation as we enter a new age of enlightment.

Roy H. Forbes, Ed.D

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